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## THE SERPENT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.

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All animals with which primitive man has come in contact have received some reverence or worship, but the three which sit highest in the house of the gods are the Serpent, the Crow, and the Hare. The serpent has been the most universally worshiped of all animals; wherever it has been known, there it has been revered. The reason is not far to seek. The primal cause of the superstitious regard of any animal lies in its "uncanniness"—a quality which the serpent possesses in a very high degree.

The characteristics which have led mankind to give the serpent such a high place in their regard may be thus summarized: its motions, whether proceeding forward like a "streak of burnished light," or still more wonderfully executing without haste and without confusion the most intricate figures;<sup>1</sup> its lightning-like rapidity in attacking its victims; its tongue continually flickering in and out of its mouth;<sup>2</sup> its power of looking like its environment;<sup>3</sup> its specter-like silence and subtlety; its faculty of sudden appearance and disappearance; its infinite patience and watchfulness; its power of continuing for hours with head raised aloft, and with brilliant eyes fixed on some object which has excited its suspicion or curiosity; its wonderful quietude when lying day after day upon the same spot as if asleep, yet eternally awake, and with open eyes fixed on all who observe it; its power of existing for long periods without food and with no diminution of its vigor; its periodical renewing of its youth by sloughing its skin; its longevity; its deadly venom; its power of fascination; its habit of frequenting ruins, lonely places, caves, and subterranean abodes.

Being possessed of so many qualities, seemingly demoniacal, others were naturally soon added, and serpent-worship, direct and

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Prov. 30:19. Kipling in his *Jungle Book* gives a vivid description of a serpent performing these evolutions.

<sup>2</sup> The reason for this unceasing motion of the serpent's tongue yet awaits a satisfactory explanation.

<sup>3</sup> All wild animals have this power in a greater or less degree.

symbolical, arose.<sup>4</sup> By reason of tradition, Christians have an almost unconquerable repugnance to the whole serpent kind. Yet the snake has not always been, and by many peoples is not yet, regarded with aversion, but with friendly regard.<sup>5</sup> This demands explanation. From its uncanniness, and especially from its deadly poison, we should expect fear to predominate in the feeling aroused by the serpent. But the fact that a poisonous snake rarely uses its power against man except to avenge an insult or injury would produce a belief in its friendliness, or at least in its neutrality, which might be inclined to friendliness.<sup>6</sup> The principal reason is, however, to be found in the fondness of the serpent for lurking about human dwellings. The silent, but ever-watchful, snake gliding about the house came to be looked upon as its protector. This belief in the guardianship exercised by the serpent is its first and most constant attribute.<sup>7</sup>

In close relation to this is the belief common among primitive people in a serpent ancestry. To them the dead must have a material body and a specific location, and the popular conception gave to them most often an animal form. The serpent was very frequently regarded as the dwelling-place of a departed soul, because of its habit of frequenting graves and houses.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> I shall here make no examination of what has been well called the "portentous non-sense" of Phallic symbolism. Phallicism was doubtless a most widespread cult, and naturally enough the serpent appears in its symbolism, but such was merely an incident in, not the essence of, serpent-worship. While Phallic practices were probably common in Israel, there is no sure reference to it in the Old Testament (*cf.*, however, W. R. Smith, *Religion of the Semites*, Note D, on Isa. 57:8).

<sup>5</sup> The serpent was often kept as a pet. In ancient Greek pictures a serpent is frequently seen under the table in place of a dog (*Journal of Hellenistic Studies*, Vol. V, p. 113). The most common serpent of Greece and Italy is the *Coluber Aesculapii*, which attains a length of about three feet, is of a mild disposition, and easily domesticated. Ælian says the ancient Egyptians kept snakes as pets.

<sup>6</sup> American Indians believe that a rattlesnake will not bite an Indian except in revenge (Emerson, *Indian Myths*, p. 43). Among the Zulus the murder of a venomous snake had to be atoned for (Ratzel, *History of Mankind*, Vol. II, p. 356).

<sup>7</sup> In classical language, its fortune; in colloquial parlance, its mascot. Should a serpent take up its abode in a Zulu house, it is *itongo*—the god of the house (Ratzel, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 356). In Armenia to this day the harmless house snakes are regarded as the family protectors, and every village and district is supposed to have its invisible guardian serpent to whom offerings are made (Abeghian, *Der armenische Volksglaube*, pp. 74 sq.). In the Punjab every householder places his house under the protection of a *naga*, or harmless snake (Crooke, *Folklore of India*, Vol. II, p. 144). The Roman *genius loci* often appeared as a serpent, and the royal and divine serpent-symbol of Egypt typifies guardianship. In modern Egypt every house has a serpent as its *harras-el-bet*, or protector of the house, which is fed on milk and eggs. In Cairo each quarter of the city is believed to have a guardian spirit in the shape of a serpent. One of the most common designs on Assyrian amulets is the serpent, and its place as guardian may be implied from its representation on boundary stones, for example on those of Merodach-Baladan and Nebuchadrezzar.

<sup>8</sup> There seems to have been a natural relation supposed to exist between mankind and the serpent. When a huge serpent issued from the body of the crucified Cleomenes the

By a combination of the two preceding views arose the conception of the serpent as an avenger. In the earliest beliefs the Greek Erinyes were the spirits of the dead in serpent form, who remained around the house or grave to avenge any injury or insult offered it, and although as early as the time of Homer the Erinyes had become more or less an abstraction, in Virgil the serpents still issue from the grave.

The serpent was also frequently regarded as the symbol or cause of life and healing.<sup>9</sup> Asklepios, Apollo, and Hygeia were all worshiped in this form, and during a plague in Rome a sacred serpent was brought from Greece to stay the pestilence. To this day the Moslem peasantry of Egypt believe most firmly in the Shekh Heridi, a serpent with shrine and priests, and cures as wonderful as those wrought by the good Ste Anne de Beaupre are reputed to be done by it.<sup>10</sup> Wisdom was ascribed to the serpent, and it has also been employed as the symbol of time or eternity.

The beliefs about the serpent may well be called catholic, and were doubtless held firmly by the ancient Hebrews; and we should expect, therefore, to find traces of them, or some of them, in the Bible.

In Tristram's *Fauna of Palestine* thirty-three species of serpents are enumerated, but of these only six are poisonous, and deaths from snake-bite are rare at the present day. Like ourselves, the people do not clearly distinguish between the harmless snakes and their deadly kinsfolk, so that many or most of the innocuous serpents are also dreaded.

The generic word for serpent is *naḥash* (נָחָשׁ). The same word also denotes divination (Gen. 30:27; Lev. 19:26; Numb. 23:23), which shows the high reputation of the snake for wisdom.

people were terrified, for this showed him to have been a semi-divine hero. They were pacified on being reminded that, as the body of a bull produced bees, and that of a horse, wasps, so the body of a man produced serpents (*Journal of Hellenistic Studies*, Vol. XIX, pp. 205 sqq.). By modern Greek peasants an unbaptized babe is called *δρακονα* ("little serpent"), and is no doubt in danger of being spirited away in that form (*ibid.*, p. 216). With this may be compared the old Arab custom of hiding a new-born baby under a caldron until daylight. Iron by its magical properties would keep it safe from jinn until it could be put under the protection of a deity (*Kinship*, p. 154).

<sup>9</sup> In 1899 a court in Larnaca, Cyprus, awarded £80 (Turkish) as damages for the loss of a snake's horn which had been lent to cure a certain disease.

<sup>10</sup> Native Christians generally identify Shekh Heridi with Asmodeus, the evil spirit exorcised from Sarrah by the fish liver and banished to Egypt (Tobit, 3:8). Perhaps the worship of this serpent may have suggested to the writer of Tobit this destination for the demon. Moslems, as a rule, hate the serpent as much as Christians do, and a Mohammedan will carefully break every hair which comes out of his beard lest it become a reptile.

The enchanter is the wise man, the man who has supernatural knowledge and power. In course of time the magician and his arts came to be regarded as evil, but when the name for serpent became the name for magic, it simply meant that the enchanter, medicine-man, or priest was as clever as a serpent. It is barely possible that the Arab word *hanash*, "to enchant," and *nahash* are etymologically connected.

The *Pethen*<sup>11</sup> (פֶּתֶן, Deut. 32:33; Isa. 11:8; Ps. 58:5; 91:13; Job 20:14, 16; etymology uncertain; cf. Ass. *pitnu*, "a noose, or snare") is most probably the serpent known in Egypt as the *hayye*<sup>12</sup> (*coluber* or *naja haie*, *cerastes candidus*), the common asp—a serpent very closely allied to the cobra of India, but without the spectacle markings. Like it also, although very poisonous, it is the favorite serpent of charmers and jugglers. It is not found now in great numbers in Palestine, but the reference to "charming" (Ps. 58:5, 6) seems to make it certain that the *hayye* is referred to by this name.<sup>13</sup>

The *Shephiphon* (שִׁפִּיפֹן) is mentioned once (Gen. 49:17). According to Jerome, it is the *cerastes* (*cerastes cornutus* or *cerastes hasselquistii*), a blunt-nosed, two-horned, highly poisonous viper which lurks in the sand, to which it has a very striking resemblance. It is much dreaded on account of the deadliness of its venom and its ferocity. Tristram says: "I have seen my horse rear, and shake with terror, on descrying this little snake lurking in the depression of a camel's foot-mark." The characteristics ascribed to Dan as a tribal head make the identification of *Shephiphon* certain.

The *Eph'eh* (אֶפֶּה, Isa. 30:6; 59:5; Job 20:16) gets its name from the hissing sound it makes, and may be the *daboia*, but more than one species may have been included under the name. In Arabic the name is usually given to the Algerine viper (*echidna arietans*), a small but very malignant serpent.

The word 'Akhshub (עֲכָשׁוּב, once only, Ps. 140:4) is translated "adder," but this is only a guess, for there is no root

<sup>11</sup> It is not impossible that the Greek *python* is from some form of this word. For *python* there is no derivation to be found in Greek (cf. Liddell and Scott, *Lexicon*).

<sup>12</sup> This is the common Arabic name for serpent and is cognate to the word for life. In Egypt the name has become limited to the *cobra* or *uraeus*.

<sup>13</sup> In an old commentary on this passage it is gravely related that the asp has been known to put the point of its tail in one ear and lay the other on the ground to keep itself from being charmed.

available from which a suitable meaning may be derived. The versions all agree that some kind of a serpent is meant, but the Targum rendering is "spider" (עוכרית, Heb. עכברית), which may be the correct reading. The spider and serpent are paralleled in another passage (Isa. 59:5).

The name Qipoz (קפוז), once only, Isa. 34:15) is translated by the A.V. as "great owl," but from the Arabic *Qiffazatun* it is now known to be the arrow snake (*eryx jaculus*), a reptile very common and harmless, but exceedingly rapid in its movements, hence its name.

Serpents are sometimes referred to as *Zohelim* (זחלים, "creepers," Deut. 32:24, "creepers in the dust;" Mic. 7:17, "creepers on the earth").<sup>14</sup> The name comes from a root meaning to withdraw or retire (cf. Job 32:6). When Adonijah sought to make himself king, he went to the stone *Zohelath* to complete his preparations and be crowned (1 Kings 1:9). Some connect this name with Saturn (called in Arabic *Zuhal* because of its remoteness); but actual worship of so specialized a form did not exist in Israel at this early date. The name means "Serpent Stone;" and was most probably applied to it because of its shape or markings, and hence from very early times it would be regarded as sacred. It thus became a landmark and a common meeting-place for the transaction of business and the taking of oaths.<sup>15</sup> If the serpent was the totem of the Davidic house, as is claimed by Robertson Smith, then by that family *Zohelath* would be regarded with special veneration.

The most dreaded of all the serpents mentioned in the Old Testament is the *Siph'oni* (צפעני, Isa. 11:8; 59:5; Jer. 8:17; Prov. 23:32; צפע, a collective form, Isa. 14:29). The English version translates by "adder" with variant "cockatrice" (A.V.) or "basilisk" (R.V.). Because of the fear in which it was held most commentators now take it to refer to the yellow viper, *Daboia Xanthina*, the largest and most feared of the reptiles of Palestine. The *Daboia* is peculiarly an Indian species and is almost the same as the dreaded *Tic-polonga* of Ceylon (*D. Russelii*). The objection to this identification is the mention of the eggs of the *Siph'oni* (Isa. 59:5), whereas the *Daboia*, being

<sup>14</sup> Duhm suggests that in Ps. 91:13 *zohel* should be read instead of *shahal*, but there seems no need of such an emendation. As it stands it gives a good parallelism with the second part of the verse.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. the common use of plighting stanes in Scotland in former days.

a viper, does not lay eggs.<sup>16</sup> Because of this Riehm identifies it with the *Tarbophis fallax*, a very pretty nocturnal snake which sometimes attains to the length of three feet.<sup>17</sup> It is, however, non-poisonous, and cannot be the serpent meant. Riehm says it was believed to have the power of spitting its venom, and was thus the object of much dread. While myths like this may have been believed about it, still it was too common a reptile to inspire such fear as is implied in the Old Testament without any cause. What the Revisers meant by "basilisk" is not clear. Many commentators have, or seem to have, a vague impression that there is somewhere in Africa a small but most deadly viper of this name which is meant. But neither in Africa nor anywhere else is there a serpent known by this name.<sup>18</sup>

If we understand by "basilisk" what the A.V. means by "cockatrice," we have most probably the correct meaning. The *Siph'oni* was a serpent with fabulous powers for evil.<sup>19</sup> The myth of the basilisk came to the Greeks from Egypt or Assyria, as it must have taken its rise among peoples accustomed to very poisonous reptiles. The myth would certainly be an accepted belief in Palestine. Some have taken the name to be identical with *Typhon*, the name of the evil dragon or serpent, the enemy of the good gods of Egypt. There is a striking similarity between the names. As no good derivation has yet been found in the Semitic languages, the word is in all likelihood a foreign one and may easily be the same as *Typhon*. In Isa. 11:8 the word translated "den," R.V., is *me'urath*, the feminine of *ma'or*,

<sup>16</sup> Vipers are ovo-viviparous, *i. e.*, they retain the eggs in their bodies until they are hatched. It may be said that misbeliefs about serpents are very common, and the writer of this chapter being in Babylonia such a mistake is to be expected. Even writers of today fall into the same error. Cheyne on this passage says: "They brood purposes as deadly as *vipers' eggs*." The Old Testament writers seem, however, to be well acquainted with the habits of snakes; *e. g.*, they always speak of the serpent biting, not stinging (in Prov. 23:32 the verb means "to pierce," not "to sting").

<sup>17</sup> Called by Germans *Katzenschlange*; by Rhiem, *Ailurophis vivax*; by Tristram, *Tachymenis vivax*. I use the name given in the British Museum catalogue.

<sup>18</sup> No serpent called "basilisk" appears in any zoological list or good dictionary which I have been able to consult. The only animal known by this name is a small American lizard of the family *Iguanidae* which has on its head a hollow crest inflatable at will.

<sup>19</sup> The basilisk (Gk. *basiliscos*, Lat. *regulus*), "little king," was a small serpent, but the king of all reptiles "because of his stately pace and magnanimous mynde." It went half upright, and had a coronet upon its head. The deadly power of its poison was such that shrubs were withered and stones broken by its breath. It killed by its piercing glance. The name "cockatrice" is a corruption of the Med. Lat. *calcatrix*, and from the name came the belief that it was hatched by a serpent or a toad from a cock's egg. The attributes of the cockatrice were the same as those of the basilisk.

"a luminary" (Gen. 1:14), and, if the correct reading, must refer to the gleaming eye of the basilisk or to its coronet.<sup>20</sup>

The Saraph serpents are mentioned three times (Numb. 21:5-9; Deut. 8:15; Isa. 14:29). If the name be not of foreign origin, it comes from a root meaning "to burn" (Gen. 11:3; 2 Chron. 16:14; Isa. 44:16). It is generally held that it is given to them because of their bite, and hence may describe any serpent. This is most unlikely. The same name is applied to the divine attendants in the vision of Isaiah and cannot there refer to biting, but to the appearance of the beings. The name is most likely given to the serpents for the same reason. From the name, and because the "cherub" was at first probably the thunder-cloud (*cf.* Ps. 18:11), it may be concluded that the "seraph" originally indicated the lightning, the serpent of the sky. In course of time the name was applied to certain serpents, presumably with a mythical reference. The "flying serpent" of Isa. 14:29 is evidently some reptile more or less mythical; probably a dragon of some kind. Herodotus mentions an invasion of Egypt by flying serpents, which shows that the Arabian desert was believed to be the home of such reptiles.<sup>21</sup>

The name *Tannin* (תנין) is used when the writer speaks of some creature of the reptile kind of which he has no very clear knowledge. It is large, powerful, and poisonous, but he knows little of its actual attributes, size, and shape. Among the creatures made on the fifth day are the "great *tanninim*," or sea-monsters, but the writer knows nothing more about them. In Exod. 7:9 (*cf.* 4:3) and Ps. 91:13 the *tanninim* are evidently some kind of serpent; in Isa. 27:1, 51:9; Pss. 74:13, 148:7; Job 7:12, they are mythical dragons. In Deut. 32:33 the poison of *tanninim* is spoken of, and the reference may be either to dragons or semi-fabulous serpents.

#### SYMBOLISM OF SERPENT.

In the Old Testament the serpent is almost exclusively the type of evil of some kind. In the New Testament this is intensified, and the worst name the Apocalypse can apply to the "devil"

<sup>20</sup> It is suggested that the word is a corruption, or dialect form, of מִסְרָה (Gen. 19:30), or better מִסְרִיחַ, Jer. 21:13.

<sup>21</sup> The belief that a serpent can throw itself for a considerable distance at the object it desires to strike, and so may be called a "flying serpent," dies hard, as all superstitions and misbeliefs do (see *Imperial Dictionary of the Bible*). The thing is impossible.



is to call him an "old serpent"—a name implying all evil and mischief. The only clear exception in the whole Bible is in the language of the Christ himself, who points to the serpent as a source from which disciples may learn wisdom.

The serpent is itself the author of all evil (Gen., chap. 3); it is the type of the wicked (Isa. 59:5; Pss. 58:5, 140:4); of treachery, deceit, and lying-in-wait (Gen. 49:17); of desolation (Isa. 34:15); of degradation (Mic. 7:17). Serpents are the instruments of God's punishment (Numb. 21:6; Isa. 14:29; Jer. 8:17; Amos 5:19; Job 20:16). The food and drink of the wicked are likened to the poison of the serpent (Deut. 32:33; Job 20:14); also wine itself (Prov. 23:32). The glory of the messianic reign is figured forth in the saying of the prophets that even the most deadly serpents shall then be harmless (Isa. 11:8; Ps. 91:13). In Jesus ben Sirach (21:2) the serpent is the type of sin itself:<sup>22</sup> "Flee from sin as from a serpent; if thou comest nigh it, it will bite thee."

Rods were turned into serpents on two occasions in the preparation for the exodus; once by God for Moses (Exod. 4:3 *sqq.*), and again by Aaron and the sages of Egypt in a contention between them (Exod. 7:9 *sqq.*).<sup>23</sup> The two narratives are very different. The story of Moses is simple and dignified, and has a worthy purpose in the development of the history; that of Aaron and the wise men resembles ordinary folklore stories of contests between magicians. The former narrative is by J, the latter by P, which may account for the different names used; but the name *tannin* (7:9 *sqq.*, LXX, *δρακόν*), is more likely used to give the idea of some kind of monster, serpent, or dragon, which could swallow up the dragons of the other wonder-workers. The fact that the magicians performed the same feat shows that the action of Aaron was not regarded by the writer or reader as specially divine or supernatural. The narrative seems to lack that high moral purpose which we always expect in any divine interference with the ordinary course of nature.<sup>24</sup> The serpent has no symbolism in either case.

<sup>22</sup> The meaning of Jer. 46:22 is very obscure. The text is manifestly corrupt, and the Masoretic reading impossible.

<sup>23</sup> One of the most common feats of an Arab serpent-charmer is to turn the *hayye* serpent into a stick, i. e., to throw it into a hypnotic, rigid condition. It is said that this is done by the juggler pressing the nape of the viper's neck in a certain way.

<sup>24</sup> It is noteworthy that there is no exhibition of fear when these monsters appear. Cf. Exod., chap. 4.

*The fiery serpents.*—The story of these reptiles (טִרְפִּים, Numb. 21:5–9) is extremely difficult of explanation, if it is to be taken literally in all its parts. This difficulty has been felt by both rabbinic and Christian interpreters. Neither of these have given much attention to the essential questions, but have been generally content to draw some lessons from the story, or to find some allegorical meaning in it. The making of an image is in direct opposition to all the divine Torah to Israel, the aim of which was to root out all empty symbolism and fetish veneration. Therefore for God to command that a serpent's image should be made to be revered is so inconsistent as to be unbelievable. If *Nehushtan* (2 Kings 18:4) was this image, it simply shows that the inevitable in the then condition of religion in Israel happened—the miracle-working image became a god.<sup>25</sup>

The story divides itself into two parts: (1) the sending of the serpents as agents of divine vengeance; (2) the making of a bronze image to heal the bitten ones. The first part (vss. 5–7) has every appearance of being founded on an actual occurrence. When it is said God sent serpents, it is merely the Semitic equivalent of our statement: it happened in God's providence. The event may or may not have been miraculous; the Semites did not distinguish. Serpents venomous and harmless are today quite plentiful in the Arabian Desert, and that they were so in ancient times we know from Esarhaddon, who says in his *Annals* that in his campaign against the Arabs his army marched for "twenty double leagues through a country where serpents and scorpions covered the ground like grasshoppers." There is also a tradition that Alexander lost many soldiers by snake-bite.<sup>26</sup> It is, however, contrary to the nature of serpents to attack men in the manner here represented, although the poison serpents are very easily stirred up to anger.

Three explanations of the narrative may be offered: (1) During their wanderings the Israelites came into a district infested with venomous serpents, and many of the people were bitten and died.

<sup>25</sup> The serpent was regarded by many peoples as a suitable symbol of God. It was so in Egypt. Primitive peoples are almost bound up to the use of animal similes for the deity. We can the more readily understand this when we remember that Christians yet use animal figures to represent God, and use animal names in addressing Him, as in the *Agnus Dei*, and "Come Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove." Neither the sheep nor the dove are remarkable for special powers, as are the bull and the serpent. The use of the dove image comes probably from the misunderstanding of a simile; the flight, not the spirit, was like a dove.

<sup>26</sup> Strabo, 15:2:7.

According to Semitic theology, this must have been a visitation of God for the sins of the people, and the murmuring against the manna appeared to them to be an adequate cause. (2) These serpents were specially and supernaturally prepared of God for this purpose. When we take into account the Semitic mode of expression, this view requires no consideration. (3) The plague was the outbreak of some disease, the symptoms of which resembled serpent-bite. As an exact remembrance of the character of the pestilence was lost, it came to be regarded as an attack of real serpents. If this view be correct, then what the disease was cannot now with certainty be ascertained. A very interesting, if not altogether convincing, theory is put forward by Hirsch in his *Historical and Geographical Pathology*.<sup>27</sup> According to him, the plague was an epidemic of the parasite commonly known as "guinea-worm" (*Filaria* or *Dracunculus medinensis*). This parasite is quite common in parts of Africa, India, and Arabia. It enters the body in drinking-water (some say through the pores of the skin), and attacks most frequently the legs and the feet. There is no social, racial, or other immunity from the attacks of this filaria.<sup>28</sup> The theory that the *seraphim* which attacked the Hebrews were *Filariæ medinensis* receives some support from Plutarch, who states, on the authority of the geographer Agatharchides, that the dwellers by the Red Sea suffer from a serious malady due to "small serpents" (*δρακόντια μικρά*) which issue from the skin to gnaw the arms and legs, and retire underneath the skin if disturbed, causing intolerable pain.<sup>29</sup> It is impossible to decide absolutely between the first and the third of these explanations, but one or other of them must be correct.

The first part of the narrative shows the serpents as agents of vengeance—a rôle they frequently play in the traditions of many peoples. In the second part they have a character entirely different, but equally common. The serpent becomes the symbol, or agent, of healing.

Is the second section by the same hand, and from the same time, as the first? The whole account is ascribed by critics to

<sup>27</sup> *New Sydenham Society Transactions*, 1885.

<sup>28</sup> A member of the medical staff of Toronto University recently removed several of these worms from a missionary lately returned from Africa. The operation was difficult owing to the rapidity with which the filaria moved. Its snake-like movement as it passed from place to place under the skin could be easily observed.

<sup>29</sup> *Symposion*, 8, 9:3. It is noteworthy that the plague attacked the Israelites near the Red Sea.

JE, which simply means it is not by P. It stands in a P setting (vss. 4, 10, 11), being by that writer or school, so that it is of late date, in its present form. Vss. 5-7 are in the purest classical Hebrew and seem to belong to the earliest strata of J. It may be confidently asserted that vss. 8 and 9 are not so old, though there is nothing in them which can with certainty be declared to be late Hebrew. The *waw* with the perfects may be explained as consecutive, and the forms to be conditional imperfects: "So it would be, if the serpent had bitten a man he would look at the bronze serpent, and would live." Such a construction is very rare in early Hebrew; it is doubtful if there be any parallel to this passage so taken, and the וַיִּרְאֵהוּ with which vs. 9b opens seems certainly to be late; early Hebrew would have said וַיִּרְאֵהוּ. The conclusion one draws is that vss. 5-7 give an old and accepted tradition, which was incorporated by J, while vss. 8 and 9 were added later, for some special purpose, or from an independent source.

*Nehushtan*.—The story of the bronze serpent has a very close connection with *Nehushtan*, a greatly venerated image, destroyed by Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:4). The verse in Kings, which is the only reference to *Nehushtan* there is, is certainly very much later than its context which it interrupts to illustrate. The demonstrative pronoun with which it opens points to this, and marks the verse as having been originally a marginal note or comment, which was later incorporated into the text. The employment of perfects with simple *waw* makes its late origin assured. This does not destroy the historical character of the narrative, for such a cult as this serpent worship cannot be the invention of a writer.<sup>30</sup>

This image manifested its divine power as images always have done, and yet do by acts of healing. Its worship would be participated in by Yahweh-worshippers seeking healing, although it was certainly no part of the religion of Yahweh. It was probably some Canaanitic cult or fetish adopted by the Judaites. Kittel thinks the image was placed in the temple by Ahaz, who was fond of innovations, and who perhaps received it from the Assyrians (*cf.* 2 Kings 16:10); but the time between Ahaz and Hezekiah

<sup>30</sup> This verse shows us how little we know of the actual condition of popular religion in Israel. By the merest accident we learn of an extended and popular serpent-worship in Judah maintaining itself until late times. A copyist or editor drawing upon his knowledge of tradition gives in a note some illustrations of Hezekiah's zeal for Yahweh, and in doing so gives us a wonderful glimpse into Israel's practical faith.

is too short to permit it becoming a national idol enshrined in the affections of the people, as is implied by the narrative. It was most likely a wonder-worker among the Canaanites before the Hebrews entered the land. These allurements of its worship and the proofs of its divinity proved too strong for these immigrants, and it became to them also a god of healing. It may have been the chief idol of Jerusalem, and remained there after David took the city and made it his capital; or it may have been removed to the temple by an early king, perhaps Solomon himself, in order to add popularity to the shrine which the kings desired should be the center of the national religion. Robertson Smith accounts for the place of this image in the temple by making it the totem symbol of the royal family. It is, however, the totem animal that is worshiped, not its symbol; and this theory leaves the healing power of the image unaccounted for, as also the widespread homage it received. The reigning house might favor the image because it was of the serpent totem, but this does not explain the origin of the idol.

The rise of prophecy with its apprehension of the spirituality of God placed the non-Yahwistic cults and superstitious practices in Israel upon their defense, when doubtless many "great and strong arguments" were built upon very slender foundations of old tradition, or upon none that existed outside the imagination of some clever apologist. The defenders of *Nehushtan* would be especially hard pressed. They had to endure more than the general polemic, for the story of the fall had begun to circulate, and it was of a kind to appeal to the imagination of the people. If *Nehushtan* is to maintain its place, authority must be had for it, and none less than Moses would be effective. Accordingly the old story of the serpents in the wilderness was expanded into a defense of *Nehushtan*.<sup>31</sup>

*The Serpent of the fall.*—The great question of how sin appeared among men made in the image of God is answered very simply by saying that God forbade the parents of the race to eat of the fruit of a certain tree in Paradise, but a serpent tempted them and they fell. The mystery of sin is explained by a mystery

<sup>31</sup>Two other explanations are possible. The bronze serpent of Moses was invented in the reign of Manasseh when that monarch restored the serpent image, as he must certainly have done, unless the redactor or copyist of Kings who added 18:4 ascribed, through inadvertence, to Hezekiah's reign, reforms which really belonged to Josiah's (cf. 2 Kings 23:6). Or the explanation may have arisen later to account for such a strange thing in Israel as serpent-worship.

still greater, if the story is to be understood literally. Rabbinic, followed by Christian, interpreters have held that Satan, the constant enemy of God and king of all evil spirits, had either taken the appearance of a serpent, or had entered into the body of one and so approached the woman. Of such a belief there is absolutely no trace in the narrative, which treats of a serpent and that only. A serpent tempts; a serpent is punished. It is a common belief that *jinn* or spirits appear in animal forms, of which the serpent is more frequently chosen than any other;<sup>32</sup> but the doctrine of the devil is too advanced for the time from which this narrative dates. Satan does not appear till very late in the Old Testament (Job 1:6; Zech. 3:1; 1 Chron. 21:1),<sup>33</sup> and the first identification of the serpent with Satan is in Wisdom 2:23, 24.<sup>34</sup>

The idea of a struggle between good and evil is common to all peoples who have attained to any moral consciousness. For a non-philosophical people the abstract is too difficult to apprehend, and all things are personified. Evil has thus always taken a definite form, preferably that of a serpent.<sup>35</sup> The serpents or dragons are, however, always evil deities or spirits in that shape, and had the author of the story of the fall been writing what he desired to be taken as literal history, he would have made some mention of evil spirits, as the belief in them was universal. Since

<sup>32</sup> To Moslems every serpent has a great deal of demon in it. *Jinn* and *ghul* are often employed as names for serpents (Quran, 27:10; 28:31); *Shaitan* is also so used. Cf. the common Christian belief of former days that the devil, disguise himself as he would, could never divest himself of the goat-hoofs.

<sup>33</sup> With 1 Chron. 21:1 cf. 2 Sam. 24:1, where it is said that it was Yahweh, not Satan, who incited David to number the people.

<sup>34</sup> In Talmudic theology Satan is called the "old serpent" (cf. Apoc. 20:21), because with him began history. Some held he was made at the same time as Eve, while others identified him with Sammael, the angel of death who, from being the highest throne-angel of God, fell by lust on seeing Eve. Three reasons for the temptation appear in the Talmud: (1) Satan desired to have complete control of the world (cf. Luke 4:6, and the story of Tiamat). (2) He was jealous because the human pair were ministered to by the angels of service. (3) He was enamored of Eve, and seduced her. The grosser explanation, being the more easily understood, was the most common. Cain was the son of Eve, and Satan and many other demons came into existence in the same way, though it is not clear whether the latter were children or grandchildren of Eve and the serpent. In some places, but not often or thoroughly, the Talmud rises to the view that the fall was rebellion against God, with no reference to a particular sin or a literal serpent (Weber, *Altisynagogale palästinische Theologie*, pp. 210 sqq.).

<sup>35</sup> In Egypt the enemy of good had generally the form of a serpent or dragon; and the great serpent Apep lay in wait beyond death to destroy souls on their way to the Elysian fields. In Babylonia, Tiamat was a dragon of most hideous aspect, and in the Vedas Trita fights with the serpent Ahi. In Zoroastrianism the idea of this struggle was very fully developed, but the serpent is merely one of the evil beasts, and it was not until influenced by Genesis that Ahriman takes the form of a serpent and brings the first human pair to destruction. The Babylonian and probably the Egyptian beliefs must have been known to J.

he does not, we must conclude that he simply chooses this mode of expression as the best means of conveying some great prophetic message.

The idea of the serpent and the tree of knowledge is not original with the writer. In Babylonian symbolism there is no object so common as the sacred tree, often with the symbolical number of seven branches, and guarded by Cherubim. In the literature so far discovered nothing corresponding to the fall has been found, but the part of the creation story where it would occur, if any tradition of it existed, has yet to be brought to light. An ancient cylinder has, however, been unearthed whose rude engraving shows two figures seated at a fruit tree, while behind one of them, from the dress evidently a woman, a serpent is standing. Some have denied that this has any reference to the story told in Genesis, but it seems obvious that the two belong to the same tradition.

Some critics find in the story of the fall two strata. In one the serpent is not evil but wise, and the initiator of mankind into knowledge, while in the other and later he becomes a tempter. As has been seen, the serpent was regarded by the Semites, as well as by other peoples as being the wisest of animals.<sup>36</sup> In Genesis the wickedness of the serpent is not expressly declared, while its superior wisdom is emphasized. The quality attributed to it is עֵרֶם a word of the same root as עֵרְמָה the highly praised discretion, or power of discernment which is to be given to the simple, to those of open mind and needing instruction (Prov. 1:4); the condition in which Adam and Eve are described as being in before eating of the fruit. There is nothing to show definitely what is meant by the Babylonian picture, and it may well be, it represents, not the fall into sin, but the impartation of knowledge. There was a Babylonian myth about a dragon which issued from the sea to teach the first people wisdom, and from the continual appearance of the sacred tree we may perhaps infer that the original form of the story was connected with this serpent and the tree. A curious parallel appears in America, where among certain Indians the medicine tree—that is, the tree of knowledge rather than of healing—is inhabited by a serpent. Something like this was probably the form in which the

<sup>36</sup> The Chinese consider the serpent to be the symbol of supernatural wisdom, and ascribe to the kings of heaven serpent bodies.

myth reached the writer, but the impression he desires to convey is that the serpent was the symbol of evil, not good, which accounts for what appear to be two strata in the Genesis narrative.

The occasion for the narrative may be twofold: (1) to combat prevailing superstitions; (2) to unfold some prophecy. The writer is J—a man of Judah, as is generally acknowledged. He knew therefore of the widespread serpent-worship among his people—a cult which he would strongly oppose. He could deal no harder blow at serpent-veneration than by putting into popular form a story making the serpent the author and symbol of all evil.<sup>37</sup> But he has another and a higher purpose. The writer is a prophet of God, of wonderful insight into the moral conditions of things. He knows the way of sin; he sees man corrupted by its power; but he sees also that man should, and by God's help can, be conqueror over it.<sup>38</sup> Good, not evil, is the goal of mankind. Evil may bruise him as to the heel, but there is a divine enmity, an unquenchable warfare, appointed by God between man and sin, and the seed of the woman should and shall bruise the serpent's head. The great purpose of J in this allegory is to instruct man as to the real character of sin, to turn him from evil to good, and to inspire him with hope for the struggle.<sup>39</sup>

Because the curse pronounced upon the woman is to be realized in child-bearing, it has frequently been held that the serpent represents the lusts of the flesh, and the first sin was of this class. The prophet's personal opinion cannot be known, but it is utterly alien to his purpose to convey such a meaning. He is dealing with sin in the abstract, as separation, and the cause of separation from God, and he makes the curse of sin what was regarded in his time as its most marked result. Time and again the Old Testament writers mention the pain of child-birth as a type of the greatest suffering.<sup>40</sup> This, then, was the woman's curse. In the same manner the curse of the man and the serpent are what was regarded as the greatest evil attending their life.

<sup>37</sup> The date of writing would then probably be in the time of Hezekiah. The developed form of prophecy in this passage would seem to point to a later date than the time of the first of the great prophets.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Gen. 4:7.

<sup>39</sup> Because of the greatness of the prophetic torah in this chapter it seems impossible that the writer meant it to be taken literally. Since the time of Milton evangelical commentators have generally regarded Gen. 3:15 as the first prediction of the Christ. Calvin pointed out correctly that it does not refer primarily to the Christ but to mankind.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Mic. 4:9; Isa. 13: 8; 21:3.



Man had to work and sweat to wring the means of subsistence from the niggardly soil of Canaan, and it is the degradation of the serpent that he goes upon his belly.<sup>41</sup> The malediction, "Dust thou shalt eat" could never be understood literally.<sup>42</sup>

Is the name given to the woman (*Hawwah*, Gen. 3:20) connected with the name for serpent in Arabic (*ḥayyat*) and in Syriac (*hewya*)? Wellhausen thinks the identity of the name of the first woman with the Arabic and Syriac is to be explained by some myth which gave Eve a serpent form.<sup>43</sup> He quotes from a Syriac source which says: "Satan disguised himself as a serpent in order to look like Eve, and thereby cause her to sin, as one teaching a parrot to speak, talks from behind a mirror, so that the parrot thinks it is one like itself who is speaking." The Arabian dynasty of Edessa, the princely family of Taiji, and the kings of Abyssinia were supposed to be descended from serpents.<sup>44</sup> An additional argument for this hypothesis of Wellhausen might be found in the doctrines of some Gnostic sects. The Ophites, for example, revered the serpent, and regarded it as the world-soul, the mother of all. Such a doctrine could not be altogether new with the Gnostics, but was probably some old Syrian superstition, or myth given a philosophical dress. It is, however, very precarious to build so large an argument upon a name which may not after all come from an Arabic or Syriac source.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Sanskrit name *uraga*, "breast-goer."

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Isa. 49:23; Pss. 72:9; 102:10.

<sup>43</sup> Among certain tribes in Africa the serpent is regarded as the mother of mankind, and among some North American Indians it is the symbol of the female principle (Emerson, *Indian Myths*, p. 380). *Ahuacoatl*, the name of the Mexican "all mother," is generally translated "serpent woman," but Brinton translates it "mother of twins." (Rig Veda *Americanus*, p. 17.)

<sup>44</sup> Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 4th ed., p. 313, note; *Reste*, 2d ed., p. 154.

<sup>45</sup> Robertson Smith (*Kinship*, 177) derives the name from the Arabic *ḥayy*, "a family;" and compares with it, 1 Sam. 18:18, "What am I or my *ḥayy*?" (i. e., my kinsfolk, or clan).